

ROTARY INCUBATION STATION FOR IMMUNOASSAY SYSTEMS

Background of the Invention

Area of the Art

The invention relates generally to automated chemical analyzers, and specifically to
5 an incubation station for automated chemical analyzers.

Description of the Prior Art

Immunodiagnostic instruments are widely used in clinical chemistry sampling and
analyzing applications, and often involving the incubation process for performing various
assays. In conventional immunoassay systems, rotary incubation wheels have been
10 introduced. However, most prior art rotation incubation wheels are rotated by a center
pivot shaft. These center pivot wheels are usually driven by timing belts. This
conventional design often creates timing belt tension problems and/or belt-wear problems.
In addition, it often causes problems with outside edge support when any form of pressure
is applied.

15 A further problem with conventional rotary incubation stations is that the reaction
vessels are dragged in machined grooves that are semi-rectangular shaped. However,
whenever a reaction vessel is dragged over any type of a transition, the reaction vessel can
bounce, which causes splashing of the contents inside the reaction vessel. Therefore, the
transition areas have to be tightly controlled.

20 Other problems of conventional incubation stations include limited staging areas,
complicated designs, and limited accessibility.

Therefore, it is desirable to provide a new rotary incubation station that overcomes
the problems of the conventional incubation stations and provides advantageous features
for the incubation process of the automated assays.

Summary of the Invention

It is an object of the present invention to provide a novel and unique rotary incubation station for automated chemical analyzers, such as an immunodiagnostic instrument.

5 The objects and advantages of the present invention are achieved in a rotary incubation station of the present invention by implementing a unique design of a spur gear-driven two-wheel design. The rotary incubation station of the present invention has two rotary wheels. The primary wheel is an incubation and storage wheel. The secondary wheel is a wash and read wheel.

10 The incubation and storage wheel has multiple nesting positions for vessels, and utilizes a spur gear as a driving mechanism. The wheel is positioned horizontally by fixed position bearings to make sure that the wheel is located in the same location after removal and replacement. The horizontal tensioner applies spring-loaded tension on the wheel so that it nests on the fixed horizontal position bearings.

15 The incubation and storage wheel is further stabilized and positioned in the vertical direction by vertical pressure bearings. Pressure is applied to the wheel with a spring-loaded thrust washer that is part of the station cover.

 The wash and read wheel has a similar driving and bearing arrangement as the incubation and storage wheel, except it rotates in a clockwise direction with a different
20 timing. Both wheels are very easy to remove vertically since only the horizontal tension-bearing assemblies contain the wheels.

 In summary, the rotary incubation station of the present invention includes a generally circular ring-shaped outside rotary wheel positioned on a stationary platform and having a plurality of nesting locations for washing and reading vessels, and a generally
25 circular disc-shaped inside rotary wheel positioned on the platform inside the outside rotary wheel and having a plurality of nesting locations for the incubation and storage of vessels. The rotary incubation station utilizes spur gear mechanisms for rotating the outside and inside rotary wheels, allowing accurate control of the respective rotation of the outside and inside rotary wheels.

30 Such an arrangement has been found to provide a number of advantages. As explained in greater detail below, the rotary incubation station of the present invention utilizes spur gear driven wheels which have a positive non-flexing drive motion. The two-

wheel design of the incubation station of the present invention also creates a very compact area for incubation storage, which requires less surface area for thermal control. The rotary wheel design also provides fast access, because the incubation and storage wheel needs only to rotate limited degrees for full access of the vessels stored on the wheel.

5 The invention is defined in its fullest scope in the appended claims and is described below in its preferred embodiments.

Description of the Figures

10 The above-mentioned and other features of this invention and the manner of obtaining them will become more apparent, and will be best understood by reference to the following description, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawing(s). The(se) drawing(s) depict(s) only a typical embodiment of the invention and do not therefore limit its scope. The drawing(s) serve to add specificity and detail, in which:

15 FIGURE 1A is an illustrative perspective view of relevant portions of an automatic chemical analyzer, showing the incubation station of the present invention and two pick and place assemblies;

 FIGURE 1B is an illustrative top view of relevant portions of the automatic chemical analyzer, showing the incubation station of the present invention and two pick and place assemblies;

20 FIGURE 2A is an illustrative perspective view of a preferred embodiment of the incubation station of the present invention with encoders and magnets;

 FIGURE 2B is an illustrative isolated perspective view of the preferred embodiment of the incubation station of the present invention; and

 FIGURE 3 is an illustrative isolated perspective view of the incubation station of the present invention, with its cover removed to show the two rotary wheels.

25 FIGURE 4 is an illustrative isolated top view of the incubation station of the present invention, with both wheels removed to show the locations of the horizontal bearings and tensioners, vertical bearings, spur gears, and stepper motors.

Detailed Description of the Invention

30 The present invention is directed to a new incubation station used in conjunction with an automated chemical analyzer such as an immunodiagnostic instrument. The incubation station performs the tasks of incubating, reading, and washing vessels as part of

the assay process.

Referring to Figures 1A and 1B, there is shown the incubation station **10** of the present invention which is used as a functional part of an automatic chemical analyzer, showing the incubation station **10** and two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4**. The pick and place assembly **2** is an incubator pick and place assembly, and the pick and place assembly **4** is a wash pick and place assembly.

Referring to Figures 2A and 2B, there is shown a preferred embodiment of the incubation station **10** of the present invention, with its top cover partially cut-away, also showing the relative locations of the motor with encoder units **6** and magnets **8**.

Referring to Figure 3, the incubation station **10** is a rotary station having a generally circular-shaped platform **11** for supporting two rotary incubation wheels: a generally circular disc-shaped inside wheel **12** which is an incubation and storage wheel, and a generally circular ring-shaped outside wheel **14** which is a wash and read wheel. The two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4** are also used for transferring vessels between the inside wheel **12** and the outside wheel **14** of the incubation station **10**.

The inside incubation and storage wheel **12** has a multiplicity of densely populated nesting locations **16** for holding vessels. These multiplicity of nesting locations **16** can be randomly accessed by the two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4** with only a limited rotation of the inside wheel **12**. In fact, when the two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4** are oppositely positioned, the inside wheel **12** only needs to be rotated a maximum of 180 degrees to have any one of the multiplicity of nesting locations **16** accessed by one of the two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4**.

Similarly, the outside wash and read wheel **14** also has a multiplicity of nesting locations **18** for holding vessels, which again can be randomly accessed by the two pick and place assemblies **2** and **4** with only a limited rotation of the outside wheel **14**. The nesting locations **18** on the wash and read wheel **14** are designed to minimize the light leakage between these nesting locations **18**.

Referring to Figure 4, there is shown the incubation station **10** of the present invention, with both the inside wheel **12** and the outside wheel **14** removed to show the locations of the horizontal bearings and tensioners, vertical bearings, spur gears, and stepper motors on the station platform **11**.

The inside incubation and storage wheel **12** is positioned horizontally by several

fixed horizontal position bearings **22** to make sure that the inside wheel **12** is located in the same location after removal or replacement. One or more horizontal tensioners **24** are provided to apply spring-loaded tension on the inside wheel **12** so that it nests on the fixed horizontal position bearings.

5 The inside wheel **12** is further positioned vertically by a plurality of vertical pressure bearings **26** which position the inside wheel **12** in the vertical direction and give stability to the inside wheel **12**.

In addition, downward pressure is applied to the inside wheel **12** by a spring-loaded thrust washer that is part of the incubation station cover (not shown).

10 The two wheels **12** and **14** of the incubation station **10** of the present invention are driven by spur gear driving mechanism. The inside wheel **12** has spur gear teeth **30** on its outer periphery which are engaged with a spur gear driver **32** with a pitch diameter spacer for proper gear mating. A smooth surface diameter below the spur gear teeth is used as a bearing surface and a spacing surface to set the proper mating pitch diameter contact for
15 the spur gear driver **32**. The inside wheel **12** is driven by the spur gear driver **32** which, in turn, is driven by a rotary actuator **34**, such as a stepper motor, with an add-on encoder for positioning.

The outside wash and read wheel **14** has a similar driving arrangement as the inside incubation and storage wheel **14**. The outside wheel **14** has spur gear teeth **40** on its inner
20 periphery which are engaged with a spur gear driver **36**, which, in turn, is driven by a rotary actuator **38**, such as a stepper motor, except it rotates in a direction opposite to that of the inside wheel **12** and also with a different timing.

Described generally, the present invention is a rotary incubation station of an automated analyzer, comprising: (a) a generally circular-shaped platform; (b) a generally
25 circular ring-shaped outside rotary wheel having a plurality of nesting locations for washing and reading vessels and a plurality of spur gear teeth on its inner periphery; (c) means for positioning the outside rotary wheel on the platform adjacent to its periphery, allowing the outside rotary wheel to rotate about a first axis; (d) a generally circular disc-shaped inside rotary wheel having a plurality of nesting locations for incubation and
30 storage of vessels and a plurality of spur gear teeth on its outer periphery; (e) means for positioning the inside rotary wheel on the platform inside the outside rotary wheel, allowing the inside rotary wheel to rotate about a second axis; (f) means for rotating the

outside rotary wheel, including a first spur gear driver engaged with the spur gear teeth of the outside rotary wheel and a first actuator for driving the first spur gear, providing accurate control of the rotation of the outside rotary wheel; and (g) means for rotating the inside rotary wheel independent of the rotation of the outside rotary wheel, including a
5 second spur gear driver engaged with the spur gear teeth of the inside rotary wheel and a first actuator for driving the first spur gear, providing accurate control of the rotation of the inside rotary wheel.

The incubation station of the present invention is provided with the necessary electrical and electronic means for power supply, microprocessor control, and connection
10 with the automated analyzer's main control system for integrated control and operation.

The incubation station of the present invention has many unique and advantageous features, including the two-wheel design that provides a compact arrangement which requires less surface area for thermal control, and adaptable or easily modifiable to adapt to various immunodiagnostic instruments. In addition, the rotary incubation station of the
15 present invention utilizes spur gear driven wheels which have a positive non-flexing drive motion and provides fast access, because the incubation/storage wheel needs only to rotate limited degrees for full access of the vessels stored on the wheel. Furthermore, both the inside and the outside wheels are very easy to remove (vertically), since only the horizontal tension bearing assemblies contain the wheels.

The foregoing is meant to illustrate, but not to limit, the scope of the invention. Indeed, those of ordinary skill in the art can readily envision and produce further embodiments, based on the teachings herein, without undue experimentation. Suitable materials are commercially available and would be known to those of ordinary skill in the art in view of this disclosure.
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It is to be understood that the form of the device depicted in the figures has been chosen only for the purpose of describing a particular embodiment and function of the invention, and that the material of the invention can be addressed in various ways and incorporated in other types of devices, all of which will be evident to those working in the art.
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The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing from its essential characteristics. The described embodiment is to be considered in all respects only as illustrative and not as restrictive. The scope of the invention is, therefore,
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indicated by the appended claims rather than by the foregoing description. All changes which come within the meaning and range of the equivalence of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.